

Green Bay Community Theater's roots go back to the 1920s

As one of the state's oldest amateur theater groups, Green Bay Community Theater has a lot to look back on. Its most direct ancestors were the Little Theater in the 1920s and the Catholic Dramatic Guild in the early 1930s.

In the fall of 1936, the Norbertine Fathers paid a professional director from New York, Ralph Meade, to direct a production of *The Torch Bearer*. It was so popular that Meade was asked to do two more shows.

By 1937 the Dramatic Guild and others united to form the Columbus Community Theater, whose performances took place at the Columbus Club, located in what is now the WBAY Building. Meade was the managing director.

Until 1943 the group presented nine productions a year of the latest stage hits and famous revivals. Seven of the shows were presented at the Columbus Club and two at the Rockwood Lodge (an old property of the Packers at the site of Bayshore Park).

Of those years, the late veteran player Ollie Jacques recalled, "We were grinding them out once a month. It was the Depression and it was one very good way to spend time, and it didn't cost you a dime to belong."

The group disbanded

from 1943 through 1945 due to a lack of male actors and the departure of Meade to become the managing director of the Pasadena Playhouse.

In 1946, Herbert Selissen and Leo Kosnar took on the job of reorganizing the players who became simply the Green Bay Community Theater.

The Columbus Club was no longer available for performances, having become the home of Catholic Central High School. Five productions were presented each year in local high

school auditoriums. By 1948 Selissen held the job alone and saw to it that the company was properly incorporated.

"Herbie was inspiring, sensitive and intelligent," the late longtime CT volunteer Mary Gage remembered for the *Press-Gazette* in 1984. "He'd go to all the rehearsals, even if he wasn't in the show. Herb was intuitive and a good promoter."

In the early 1950s the theater had 150 active players, a nine-member board, and attendance of about 2,500

for the three-night run of each play. A chorus of 70 voices under the direction of Russ Widoe, joined the Green Bay Symphonette and CT to present musicals *Naughty Marietta* in 1950 and *The Red Mill* the next year to houses of 6,000 during each four-night run.

After this high point, things seemed to coast, and then headed downhill. Always nomads, the company was forced to perform in ever-stranger locations: the Northland Hotel Ballroom, the Vic Theater, the Abandoned Strand The-

ater, Pamperin Park Lodge and various school auditoriums.

Rehearsals were held above a Pine Street store, or even in a shack at the end of Doty Street behind the old Morley Murphy Building.

"There was a potbellied stove that someone would light during the day" Mary Gage recalled. "It was about 10 degrees below zero outside, about zero inside, and there were no rest rooms."

The theater's business office was in the trunk of

someone's car. Anyone who had been in a production was invited to join the board of directors, and by 1962 there were 37 members on the board. Robert Brault, a CT volunteer since 1960 noted, "We were just a bunch of nomads. As set designer, I drove through Green Bay with the convertible top down, hauling lavish furniture from place to place."

In 1966, with the end of Selissen's presidency, Brault was named to the new position of managing director. Brault pared the board to nine policy-making members and named volunteer department heads to run the actual theater functions like sound and costumes.

The late president Katie Cott announced, "CT has long felt the need for its own home — a small, intimate theater where contact between actors and audiences could be more easily established."

Shortly after this, the First Baptist Church at 122 N. Chestnut Ave. came on the market. The Garrity brothers, who ran a muffler shop on Broadway behind the church and who mainly wanted the church's parking spaces, bought the entire church property for \$16,000. They sold CT the building for \$10,500. The deal was a

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Throughout this year of Wisconsin's Sesquicentennial celebration, the *Press-Gazette* will publish a series of stories on local history. This feature, prepared with the assistance of the Brown County Historical Society, will appear on Mondays.



Neville Public Museum of Brown County

In 1949, Green Bay Community Theater staged *George Washington Slept Here*. Among those in this photo of the cast posing backstage after the play are Win Krueger, Andrea Verheyden, Jean Flatow, John Brogan, director Herb Selissen, Barbara Kaftan, Mary Gage, Ray Pagel and Bob Houle.

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rebirth for CT — a permanent home for its 30th anniversary.

"Everybody pitched in to convert the building to a theater. Bob Brault dyed tons of sheets to cover the windows," Gage recalled.

A thrust stage was built where the pulpit once stood, faced with the original sanctuary railing. The walk-in baptistry tank was removed. The church pews were removed a year later, replaced by seats from an old movie theater.

Light up the Sky was the premier production in the new facility in August 1967. CT's new Theater Guild, a women's group that presented events like the annual Black and White Ball, was the last word in the Green Bay social scene at the time.

From there it was only upward: sold-out season ticket subscriptions for up to 2,300 people at each play, the burning of the mortgage in 1974, and an audience for many who gained measures of fame in performance or teaching careers like Eddy Jason, Johnny and Bev Saxe, Steven Carlson, Parker Drew, Chris Russo, Kelly Colum and Herb Williams.

A grant from the Walter estate procured good theater seats, new carpet and drapes in 1977, and the summer of 1987 brought an expanded lobby area further carrying over the old church's gothic castle decor.

In saluting Brault on his retirement last year, CT quoted a 1964 *Press-Gazette* story that said, "Even Roget's thesaurus doesn't have an adjective to pinpoint Bob Brault. He's done something of everything." Brault had acted in 10

plays, directed 30 plays and designed and executed 148 sets in the course of 37 years.

The reins have passed to Dennis O'Donnell, a longtime CT sound technician and set

builder. As CT's fourth manager, he leads the hundreds of volunteers who produce four plays each year, 16 or more performances of each play for CT.

— Submitted by Nan Nelson